Practicing Your Presentation: More Tips

The Introductory Presentation looms near. Can you feel it? Before this course, your preparation for speeches probably involved memorizing or reading over your script. If you more or less had your script transcribed on your PowerPoint slides, you perhaps never even bothered to practice at all. But now in this class, the game is different. No script, no notes. So, how are you supposed to prepare?

First, you need to remind yourself of some key points about presentations and how they differ from traditional speeches:

1. Your audience is the most important element of the presentation. Interact and be real with them.
2. Your audience does *not* expect perfection from you. Minor errors in speaking are normal and will go largely unnoticed and unremembered.
3. Your presentation should feel like a conversation, and while it should definitely be organized, it should not be planned out to the sentence or phrase level.

Bearing these ideas in mind, you need to prepare for your upcoming presentation *without* writing down and/or memorizing any sections of it.

What to Write when Preparing

So, what *should* you write down as you prepare and practice your Introductory Presentation? The short answer is "as little as possible." If you have been following the advice from the previous readings, you probably already the know the more detailed answer, but let me recap it for you anyway. When prepping for a presentation, you should write down (1) your statement of intent, which serves as your guide throughout the planning process (see the article on "Planning Presentations with AIMC" for more information), and (2) your very minimal notes on the presentation outline to organize your main points (see the article on "Speaking in Outlines"). That's it. No scripts. No note cards. No thoughtfully penned phrases. Keep it simple and enjoy the fact that a class is finally asking you *not* to do an excessive amount of writing.

Using the Outline: A Reminder

The organizational structure posted to Blackboard under **Presentation Information > Introductory Presentation** should be your new bestie in your preparation process. As was described in the article on "Speaking in Outlines," you should jot down some minimal notes on the structure to plan your presentation—just a few words next to the different parts of the outline to jog your memory as you decide what to cover. As tempted as you may be to rewrite the outline with all your own words or to pen catchy turns of phrases or introductory lines, don't! Overpreparation by means of pre-planning your words will hurt the conversational feel your audience will expect from your presentation.

Once you have your extremely minimal notes jotted on the outline, practice talking through the outline a few times to gauge the flow of it. If you're not a good Devil's advocate for yourself (meaning that you're not good at finding the potential faults in your own work), talk through the presentation with a compassionately critical listener, someone who will politely "tell you how it is." Use that feedback to finalize the order of your main points and decide which anecdotes and bits of evidence will work best for your audience and intent.

When you feel confident with what you should cover, it's time to practice. Use the outline as your guide until you feel confident that you can say your presentation following the structure correctly. You will inevitably say the presentation differently every time you practice (which is good, since that means there is enough wiggle room that you can adjust easily to your audience), but the basic order of main points and the inclusion of the organizational elements (e.g., preview, transitions, review)—regardless of how you word them—should be consistent every time.

Practicing Like It's the Real Thing

When you no longer need to rely on the organizational structure to know what you are saying, it's time to start practicing like it's the real thing. Oftentimes when students tell me that they are struggling with presentational elements like volume, eye contact, or hand gestures, the first question I ask is whether they consistently *practice* good volume, eye contact, or hand gestures. If you practice your presentation by mumbling it to yourself while sitting at your desk with your hands under your legs, you won't magically become a charismatic speaker with resounding projection, engaging eye contact, and elegant hand gestures. All of those elements need to be practiced. So, when you practice, practice as though it's the real presentation. Stand up. Look at your stuffed animals or posters or yourself in the mirror (or if you have a willing practice audience, look at them). Gesture as you speak. Get your voice and body in the habit of presenting the right way.

Now, to be clear, I'm not suggesting that you choreograph your presentation. Don't mark up your outline with stage directions of where to move, when to look, or what gestures to make. All of those elements should feel—and should genuinely be—natural, but sometimes it takes practice to allow yourself that freedom of movement. Nerves may stop you from feeling comfortable, and the perceived magnanimity of a presentation may unintentionally constrict you. You may feel like you need to be still, be polished, or be presidential even. But remember that you are not a traditional public speaker; you are a conversationalist giving a presentation. You should be professional, yes, but *professional* is not synonymous with *robotic*. Instead, aim to give off the two messages that your mannerisms should communicate: (1) I know what I'm talking about, and (2) you can trust me.

Remember that many of the expectations for vocal quality and nonverbal behavior in a presentation apply to everyday communication. Therefore, the best way to improve those presentation mannerisms is to practice them in normal interactions. Stand up straight in everyday conversations, not just when you're in front of the class. Practice making direct eye contact and reducing bad vocal habits that make you seem unsure of yourself in everyday communication, not just when you are being graded on it. It's not realistic to expect that bad communication habits will simply disappear when you stand in front of an audience. Good communication skills—both verbal and nonverbal—are learned. It takes practice before they become "second nature," but ultimately that is the goal: to practice good communication habits so frequently that they become natural. Presentations are not the time to concentrate on your own vocal quality or nonverbal behaviors. You should practice those every day so that when it is time to present for real, your focus can be where it belongs: on your audience and on what you need to tell them.

View Yourself from the Audience's Perspective

For nervous speakers, watching yourself present may just qualify as a horror above all other horrors, but if you can move past the embarrassment, it is also one of the most informative ways you can learn about your own presentation skills and mannerisms. Go in front of a mirror or use your phone's photo app on selfie mode (preferably without the unicorn filter) and watch yourself present. Do you appear confident? Are you standing up straight? Using gestures? Smiling? If you are brave enough to hit "record" during a practice session and then listen to yourself present, you can also gauge your vocal quality. Are you loud enough? Confident enough? Speaking at a good pace? Practice talking to yourself on camera or in a mirror and adjust as needed to project the expertise and trustworthiness you need to communicate to your audience.

Other Tips for Presentation Practice Success

Here are a few other bits of advice on effective rehearsing from Sandy DiFrancesco (2016), professor emeritus from Southern's Communication Department, to help you along your way:

1. **Practice over several days.** Just as cramming for a test at the last minute can cause more nerves at test time, so does cramming for a presentation. Practicing a little each day over the course of several days utilizes **spaced repetition**, a proven method for increasing learning and retention (Carpenter et al., 2012; Kang, 2016).
2. **Visualize your success.** You have to believe you can do this. If you think the presentation will be a disaster, you may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Remind yourself that at its core, this presentation is really just a conversation with your classmates about yourself, and you can definitely handle that.
3. **Practice with an audience.** Feedback is your friend. If you have people willing to watch your presentation and offer you advice—whether in person or online—take them up on that offer. Not only can a mock audience offer you guidance after watching the presentation, but they can also give you practice engaging and interacting with live listeners, which is tough to emulate alone.
4. **Practice to "own" the material; don't practice for perfection.** You should have command of the material you present (after all, you are the expert), but you do not need to be perfect in how you deliver that information. Keep it organized and relevant, but don't try to memorize poetic phrasings. Work to feel secure with your material so that during the presentation, you can focus on the audience and be "in the moment" with them.

Practice to Learn

For some of you, talking in front of an audience may be a horrifying prospect, but planning the basic organization of your presentation and practicing good communication habits every day will help you feel far less horrified. Take the time to hone your skills of organization, good vocal quality, and professional nonverbal behaviors—rather than memorizing just this one presentation—and you will be a more confident presenter not just for the Introductory Presentation, but for every presentation after it.

References

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